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Controlled Composition in the Teaching of Style

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Controlled composition is the technique of having students copy a passage as they introduce some systematic change. A teacher might, for example, ask students to rewrite a past-tense narrative in the present or a first-person essay in the third person. The technique was pioneered by teachers of English as a second language as a way of allowing students to acquire the habit of grammatical correctness when they are not yet ready to generate substantial free writing. Such exercises are "controlled" because the changes asked for require students to make particular grammatical choices. If, for example, students are asked to rewrite a first-person passage in the third person, they are being tested for the production of -s forms of verbs. A text made up of such E.S.L. exercises is Controlled Composition in English as a Second Language (Regents Publishing, 1973) by Christina Bratt Paulston and Gerald Dykstra. The passages in this book were chosen from published works of high literary quality, both fiction and non-fiction. The authors have produced a good deal of valuable exercise material without undue artificiality by taking care to explain the circumstances in which each rewriting would make sense.

Teachers of remedial writing have been using controlled composition exercises for some time. In a remedial class such exercises can provide drill for particular grammatical points. When

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used extensively with students who have minimal skills in composition, such exercises often give students their first confidence in an ability to produce writing in any substantial quantity. A text made up of controlled composition exercises for remedial students is Write Me a Ream: A Course in Controlled Composition (Teachers College Press, 1973; also published in variant forms and under other titles) by Linda Ann Kunz and Robert R. Viscount.

I have developed a series of controlled composition exercises for use with yet a third sort of student. In advanced composition classes, and even in regular composition classes when the teacher can give some attention to nuances of style, there is the difficulty that stylistic cruces are not generated in sufficient quantity in either model essays or student writing to give students practice in making stylistic choices. It is possible to discuss each issue in turn and illustrate it in sentences from authors classical and modern. This is, of course, the way of all traditional books on rhetoric and style. But it has the disadvantage of seeming artificial to the student and alien from the world of his own writing.

What I try to do in my controlled composition exercises is to concentrate in a single short passage numerous instances of an isolated problem in style. I ask students to copy a passage making some simple systematic change that repeatedly forces them to make decisions of a particular stylistic nature. My exercise "Let's Hear It for Mickey Spillane" will serve as an example of how this happens.

Let's Hear It for Mickey Spillane

1. Watching television may be interesting and informative. 2. But reading a trashy novel is even more interesting and informative. 3. Even if you read two blood-and-guts thrillers a week, you can count on finding them informative. 4. We learn not only from what is well written but also from what is poorly written. 5. Reading an inadequate book improves the reader's critical skills and also his general facility with reading. 6. Watching a dull television show like "The New Treasure Hunt," "The Bionic Woman," or "Gilligan's Island" is considerably less informative and useful. 7. This is because television is passive and aural, engaging the ear but only a small compartment of the mind. 8. Neither mind nor body gets challenged to do its best. 9. Reading, however, is always active and mental. 10. Body and mind help each other make reading even Kiss, Me, Deadly or The Erection Set or Me, Hood an experience of an entirely different order from watching "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

Directions:

Add the word both to each sentence, being careful to make all changes necessary for the proper use of the word but no other changes.

As the student looks for a way to introduce the word both into each sentence, he finds he can sometimes do this with a minimum of fuss, for example in the first sentence, "Watching television may be interesting and informative." This easily becomes "Watching television may be both interesting and informative." But English syntax always requires exact parallelism with the word both, so in a sentence like two, "Reading a trashy novel is even more interesting and informative," the student discovers the necessity for repeating the word more if the sentence is to mean anything in the context here: "But reading a trashy novel is both more interesting and more informative." A sentence like four, "We learn not only from what is well written but also from what is poorly written," requires alertness for the change of not only ... but also to both ... and but for the discovery of what the options are here also finally requires exactly the kind of sensitivity to the shape of parallel structures that a careful writer must have. "We learn both from what is well written and from what is poorly written" is good English. "We learn from both what is well written and what is poorly written" is also good English. But the construction "We learn from both what is well written and from what is poorly written" is somehow strangely unbalanced. Sentence ten, "Body and mind help each other make reading ...," lays a trap with the words each other, which are inconsistent with the meaning of both and have to go: "Both mind and body help make reading ...." And sentence eight, "Neither mind nor body gets challenged to do its best," presents a challenge even to the experienced writer since both not only throws the sentence into the plural but also countermands the

the explicit negative--probably because we have the syntactic structure not both, meaning one or the other without specifying which. By the time the student has worked out lateral thinking like "Both mind and body remain unchallenged to do their best," he knows a great deal about parallelism, and he has a writer's experience of how one sort of syntactic choice is made.

It might seem that students would be threatened by the potential for error in working such an exercise--especially since I usually have them do an exercise in class and then have them put the sentences on the board. But in fact the discovery of the grammatical and stylistic constraints usually works out as a shared classroom experience. It is fun to figure out why something does not sound quite right, quite like English. And the fact that the material is an exercise and not original student work helps to reduce the guilty burden of error. In fact, I have a very different problem, and that is getting students to talk about what we are doing as searching for stylistic variety and not as making corrections, because, of course, there are no errors in the passages as they stand originally.

The exercises "Elizabethan Translators" and "Digging Back" are part of a series on relative clauses and allied that clauses.

Elizabethan Translators

1. Elizabethan translators, who were certainly aware that the best translators attempt attempt to reproduce the spirit as well as the letter of the original, often went about their work by making

people of other climes and ages talk and dress and act like Elizabethans. 2. Any Elizabethan translator who did not turn his characters into Elizabethans is probably unread today. 3. On the other hand, George Chapman, whose version of Homer was standard for many generations and is still striking, made little attempt to give us a picture which any modern scholar could call true to the realities of archaic Greece. 4. It is the freest Elizabethan translators who are the most interesting. 5. Chapman was one of the translators who were freed to write as Elizabethans by their unfamiliarity with the original languages of the authors whom they were translating. 6. The men who made the great Elizabethan translations from Greek, Italian, and even Latin often worked from French versions of their sources. 7. Sir Thomas North, to whom we still turn for our version of Plutarch's Lives, actually translated a French translation of an Italian translation of a Latin translation of the Greek original. 8. The North whom we continue to read is an authentic artist. 9. But the world which he creates is an Elizabethan world. 10. And it is perhaps

just as well that Plato and Aristotle and the great tragic playwrights who now signify Greek civilization for us were not available to the imaginative translators of Elizabethan England.
11. They were able to forge an enduring style from their numerous versions of the inferior Latin melodramas which Seneca bequeathed us.
12. Could they have exercised their own originality to such an extent making direct translations from the Greeks who forged Western civilization itself?

Directions:

I. Locate all the subordinate clauses in this passage.

II. Each of these subordinate clauses begins with a word like <u>who</u>, <u>which</u>, or <u>that</u>. For each that does not already begin with <u>that</u>, decide whether <u>that</u> can be substituted for the relative pronoun now there. You may have to move a preposition, but make no unnecessary changes, and do not permit the meaning of the sentence to change. In good style <u>that</u> is not used to refer to specific people.

III. In which of these subordinate clauses can the <u>that</u> or relative pronoun be omitted?

IV. Which of the subordinate clauses can be left out of the passage entirely without

substantially altering its meaning? Of course there will be some loss of detail.

Whether a clause can be removed or not will tell us whether it is restrictive or non-restrictive (that old bugbear of a distinction) and thus how to punctuate it. In class I show students how they already know which are which since (once they have understood the syntax of these rather complicated sentences) they read the non-restrictive, that is omittable, clauses in a different register. Thus, "Elizabethan translators, who-were-certainly-aware-that-the-best-translators-attempt-to-reproduce-the-spirit-as-well-as-the-letter-of-the-original, often went about their work by making people of other climes and ages talk and dress and act like Elizabethans." But with a restrictive clause there is no such change of register. I think register is a far better clue than the one traditionally given, the occurrence of pauses, since students even at a fairly advanced level typically need to pause more often than the grammar requires. And in fact the best spoken English uses pauses after a long subject, though a comma at this point in writing would be a serious lapse. Thus sentence two from the exercise, where the subject includes a long restrictive clause, "Any Elixabethan translator who did not turn his characters into Elizabethans [pause] ^ is probably unread today."

But theoretically all this is just review or clarification for our students of style. The nuance dealt with by this exercise concerns situations where <u>that</u> cannot pleasingly substitute for <u>who</u>, for example in sentence six, "The men who made the great Elizabethan translations." Similarly in sentence ten, "the great tragic

playwrights who now signify Greek civilization." But consider the difference between the two relative clauses in sentence five, "Chapman was one of the translators (who were freed to write as Elizabethans by their unfamiliarity with the original languages of the authors [whom they were translating])." The translators are a small group of flesh and blood people sitting at their desks, writing. They must be who. But the authors appear in a merely figurative sense, and that seems perfectly natural with them. "Chapman was one of the translators who [never that] were freed to write as Elizabethans by their unfamiliarity with the original languages of the authors that [or whom or even which] they were translating."

The exercise "Digging Back" is concerned with another sort of difficulty with relative and pseudo-relative clauses.

Digging Back

1. I understand genealogy is now the third most popular hobby in the United States. 2. Maybe the Roots phenomenon only indicates that America has come of age. 3. We are no longer so hungry we cannot afford to look at the past. 4. I certainly feel I will always have the interest I now do in genealogical research. 5. You know you can never find out everything about your ancestors. 6. However, every little fact you find out about them is something more you know about yourself. 7. It is amazing how much you

understand when you see in an old census record that one ancestor was a chairmaker or that another was blind. 8. And everybody has a limitless supply of ancestors. 9. Genealogy does not have to be the aristocratic hobby people sometimes seem to think before they get bitten. 10. You may find one or another of your lines is more satisfying to know about. 11. Alex Haley chose looking into one of his African lines rather than into any of his more numerous Caucasian and Saxapashaw lines. 12. Genealogical research, however, brings the deepest self-knowledge when the object is learning as much as possible about as many ancestors as possible.

Directions:

Copy this passage, adding to each sentence the phrase indicated below. Do not add the phrase to the beginning or the end of the sentence as it stands, but find some place in the middle of the sentence where it works. Make no unnecessary changes, but restore an understood that whenever your addition requires it. Add each of the following phrases to the sentence with the corresponding number:

1. after stamp and coin collecting
2. with special clarity

3. for the future
4. in future years
5. before you begin
6. from the very beginning
7. you suddenly feel
8. do not let me forget to mention
9. as a matter of course
10. especially when you begin
11. to begin by
12. the difficult one of

Since--whether or not we suppress the relative or pseudo-relative ∧ that--we tend to use pauses in speech for grouping words into restrictive clauses, saying indiscriminately, "Maybe the Roots phenomenon only indicates that America has come of age," and, "Maybe the Roots phenomenon only indicates [pause] ∧ America has come of age," it is understandable that inexperienced stylists sometimes forget that written English has developed no method of representing these pauses and so prohibits suppression of the relative pronoun in all ambiguous situations. We can say, "I understand [pause] ∧ after stamp and coin collecting genealogy is now the third most popular hobby in the United states." But we must write "I understand that ..." because there is an interruption at the juncture of relative or subordinate ∧ clause and independent clause. In sentence eight the addition turns the original sentence into a relative clause: "And do not let me forget to mention that everybody has a limitless supply of ancestors." There is no interruption at the juncture, but the grammar of the word mention creates an ambiguity, since the word

can take both clauses and simple nouns or pronouns as objects. To prevent us from momentarily reading "do not let me forget to mention everybody," we need the that, though in speech we could substitute a pause.

The last of my sample exercises provides material for practicing subjunctive survivals. Since it explores a number of interesting structures involving a high proportion of thinking to copying, it is the model for the sort of exercise I am trying to devise. Unfortunately it is a lot easier to compose a single passage that a remedial student can profitably rewrite in the singular to practice -s forms of verbs, in the past to practice converting verbs that are already past to past perfect, and in the passive to practice the conventions of scientific discourse than it is to compose a single passage that can be used to help advanced students explore the intricacies both of parallelism and of reported speech, for example. And I suppose there is only an aesthetic and no pedagogic need for one exercise to serve many purposes.

"Hypothetical Rebellion" does, however.

Hypothetical Rebellion

1. This morning your wife asked that you stay home and take care of the children. 2. You usually say that you have an important appointment when she requests that you do even the smallest thing. 3. But you were feeling bold this morning. 4. So you demanded that she make other arrangements. 5. If you were surer of yourself, you would not

give orders and you would not tell lies. 6. And if you had any sense, you would not create situations. 7. Luckily she assumed you were kidding. 8. But lest you get any serious ideas about leaving, she took your wallet as well as the car. 9. As she went out the door, she said that you could expect her home by 5:30. 10. And she requested that dinner be ready at that time. 11. She did not have to insist that you fix it. 12. If you live to be a hundred, you will always give in.

Directions:

I. You are off the hook. Rewrite this story in the third person so that it is no longer about you but is about someone named John. Make no unnecessary changes.

II. Rewrite the story in the third person, paraphrasing the subordinate clauses as infinitive phrases wherever possible without drastic rewriting.

III. Rewrite the story in the third person as if it were a synopsis of events in a novel. Begin, "In Chapter VIII of Desire's End, John's wife asks that ...."

IV. It is possible to rephrase sentences like five and six in this story so that the

> subordination of one clause to the other is indicated by juxtaposition alone rather than by the word <u>if</u>. Thus we can say, "Had you any sense, you would not create situations." Rewrite sentence five in this form. Rewrite sentences five and six in this form with the subject <u>he</u>. Can you figure out why it is not possible to rewrite sentence 12 in this form?

The first rewriting, the change from <u>you</u> to <u>he</u>, shows the student that he is quite capable of producing that esoteric form the present subjunctive. Sentences five, six, and twelve also raise important stylistic problems with the use of the past subjunctive, sentence twelve, "If you live to be a hundred, you will always give in," showing that every <u>if</u> clause is not a past subjunctive and sentence six, "And if you had any sense, you would not create situations," that only one verb (<u>be</u>) has a distinctive form for the past subjunctive. The fourth direction provides a way of testing sentences to see whether they contain past subjunctives even when the form is not distinctive since we can say, "Had he any sense, he would not create situations." Of course we cannot say, * "Live you to be a hundred, you will always give in," since this is not an hypothesis contrary to fact. You <u>might</u> possibly live so long.

The students enjoy discovering when it is that they produce the present subjunctive forms--in <u>that</u> clauses after verbs of ordering or asking. "She asked that he stay home." "He demanded

that she make other arrangements." The exercise could be used to teach this distinction to E.S.L. students. For native speakers, the main stylistic point about these sentences comes with direction number two, the substitution of infinitive phrases for these that clauses. We can say either, "This morning John's wife asked that he stay home," or, "This morning she asked him to stay home." But we cannot say, * "She requested him to do something," or, * "He demanded her to make other arrangements." Students should be guided in making a list of verbs that can and another of verbs that cannot make the conversion. They should be able to notice that many of the verbs of ordering and asking that can be followed by either infinitives or subjunctive that clauses have monosyllabic roots, and all of these verbs are basic vocabulary (most are of native Saxon origin). The longer list of the verbs that must take subjunctive clauses is made up of dissyllabic French words of relatively specialized meaning.

The third rewriting of "Hypothetical Rebellion"--with the main narration in the present tense--shows the essential timelessness of subjunctives, which remain unchanged, and advanced students should be able to figure out that the subjunctive tenses are called present and past because of their similarity in form to the corresponding indicative tenses. This rewriting usefully brings to conscious awareness the convention of using the present tense for synopsis in literary criticism.

Theoretically these controlled composition exercises are an artificial way of introducing points of style. In fact, the student's engagement with the material gives him first-hand experience he cannot get from more traditional parsings of stylists, either the great or the not so great.

--Edmund Miller